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Mourning and Melancholy in Hisham Matar's *In the Country of Men* and *Anatomy of a Disappearance*

John C. Hawley

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Sustaining a conference for over 6 years can only testify of the rigor and professionalism with which research has been carried out within the Applied Language and Culture Studies Research Laboratory (ALCS). The dimension the conference on *Cultures and Languages in Contact* the ALCS Lab organizes every other year has acquired and the impact effect it has testify of the more advanced status it has come to occupy in the realm of scientific research. The now renown event has been attracting a number of researchers who come to El-Jadida from within different parts of the country and also from all over the world who come to El Jadida, bringing with them their own language(s) and (sub)culture(s) to debate areas relating to applied language and culture studies. The conference therefore engenders real situations of cultures and languages in contact wherein people from different (sub)cultures, speaking different languages meet on a stage to debate matters academic, relating to applied language, literature, culture and translation studies.

The collection in this volume consists of reviewed articles delivered at the fourth edition of the conference on *Cultures and Languages in Contact* organized by the ALCS Lab on 14 and 15 December 2016. The collection is thus a varied set of articles touching on aspects relating to (a) applied language studies such as English language teaching, language contact and language use; (b) culture studies such as identity politics, colonial and post-colonial discourse; and (c) aspects relating to the interface between language and culture such as language and gender as well as translation studies. Sometimes, it is difficult to draw a demarcation line between the different disciplines involved, a fact which shows the interdisciplinarity of the areas debated at the conference.

Cultures and Languages in Contact IV

Edited by

R. Erguig, A. Boudlal, A. Sabil & M. Yeou

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in Contact IV**

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R. Erguig, A. Boudlal, A. Sabil & M. Yeou

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Mourning and Melancholy in Hisham Matar's *In the Country of Men* and *Anatomy of a Disappearance*

John C. Hawley

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“Give me your hand. You are now within a foot
Of th’ extreme verge” - Edgar to Gloucester, his blind father (*King
Lear*, Act 4, sc. 6)

0. Introduction

In a recent study of masculine identity in the fiction of the Arab East since 1967, Samira Aghacy analyzes those novels that “possess an underlying political awareness revealing the centrality of political life in the fiction of the Arab East and the precedence of collective over private issues” (Aghacy, 7). Hisham Matar, though, has chosen to work against the grain and to shrink the political down to the personal; politics remain almost unseen, ghost-like, something his protagonists cannot comprehend or fully see.¹ Muhammad Siddiq famously notes that “any writer can ill afford to remain uninvolved and merely watch history march by from his aesthetic ivory tower” (Siddiq, xi), but Matar’s decision to employ youthful narrators reflecting back on their younger selves provides more than an aesthetic withdrawal from politics: he has found a method to create an ironic distancing from the larger social upheaval that continues to disrupt the lives of countless Libyan men. He is intent on examining a personal crisis not only in its particular Libyan historical context, but also as exemplary of some common tropes of the psychosexual development of many men across the Arabic world. Aghacy suggests that “patriarchal masculinity” - the sort embodied by Qaddafi, for example - “remains a fundamentally paradoxical and non-uniform phenomenon, both commanding and impotent, heroic and cowardly, central and marginal ... [so that] instead of generating autonomy and self-government, patriarchy exposes the male individual to a strong sense of personal inadequacy,

¹ Because of their origin, settings, and broadly applicable allegorical characteristics, these novels lend themselves to postcolonial theoretical analysis. But like a good many others written in the postcolony, they might not fit procrustean schemas for canonically “postcolonial” literature, in the eyes of some theorists (on these distinctions, cf. Hawley; Zabuz). To my knowledge, Matar himself has not categorized his work this way.

ineffectuality, and failure to measure up to phallogentric masculine ideals” (3, 5). This is, indeed, Matar’s recurring theme, and he chooses the trope of the missing father to suggest a tenuous hold on masculine agency throughout today’s Middle East.

1. The Biography

Though he spent his early childhood in Libya and his father was deeply involved in the Libyan political scene, Hisham Matar was born in New York City in 1970, educated at Goldsmith’s College in London, and nominated for the Man Booker Prize: he is thus fully immersed in Western culture and consequently incorporates the Western literary canon as the language of his discourse community. He describes the quote from *Lear* with which this paper begins as “a line that has lived with me these past twenty-three years, ever since my father was kidnapped” (“The Return,” 2013, 49). Such an assertion suggests the cosmopolitan audience he chooses to address in his writing. His imagination does not move instinctively to the Arabic poetry of the Middle East, to a Mahmoud Darwish, Adunis, Khaled Mattawa, nor to a seminal political thinker like Frantz Fanon. He chooses instead a *Western* classic to embody the sense of helplessness with which he and millions of Arabs have lived. Matar’s writings over the years meditate over that day when his father disappeared when Matar was 20, and over the degree to which he may have had a hand in leading his father to the edge of that precipice, as *King Lear*’s Edgar did with his blind father.

Hisham’s father (Jaballah Matar) had supported King Idris. In 1969 when Qaddafi came to power Jaballah was imprisoned upon his return from work in London. Six months later he was released from prison but stripped of his rank and uniform. Qaddafi frequently sent prominent citizens and army officials who might be potential challengers out of the country; thus, in the spring of 1970 Hisham’s parents were sent to New York, where his father was appointed First Secretary in the Libyan Permanent Mission to the United Nations. Hisham was born that autumn in New York.

Matar observes that “I was conceived in that short window of time between my father’s release and his departure for New York” (Matar, Return 53): he underscores that he was conceived in Libya. Quite frequently in “The Return” he stresses his discomfort at his American

citizenship and his later residence in London, as if to underscore his authentic Libyan identity. He writes that “I am often unnerved by exiles I meet who, like me, have found themselves living in London but who, unlike me, have surrendered to the place and therefore exude the sort of resigned stability I lack” (50). He thought of New York “the way an orphan might think of the mother who had laid him on the doorstep of a mosque: it meant nothing to me, but also everything” (47). Intent on securing his position as an outsider, one who is ignored or who has not been taught the local language, he describes the “most essential character” of London to be its “secrecy” and that of New York to be its “indifference” (50).

Three years later, in 1973, Jaballah resigned his post and returned with his family to Libya. As Hisham puts it, “from this point on, my father had the attention of the dictatorship” (53). His uncle tells him many years later that the Qaddafi regime knew everything that Hisham’s father was doing in opposition to the government after his return from New York, and in 1979, accused as a reactionary, Jaballah and his family fled into exile in Cairo. Hisham is nine when this occurs. After completing his early schooling in Egypt, Hisham moves to London and studies architecture. While Hisham is there, his father is kidnapped by the Egyptian authorities and shipped back to Libya - and his son has never seen him since. In 2011, looking back on his life, Hisham writes that it is “as if part of me had stopped developing the moment we left Libya” (50) - which would have been when they went into exile in Egypt when he was nine. And he reports in an interview with Cressida Leyshon that “bizarrely, soon after my father’s abduction I began to lose my Egyptian accent. Perhaps it was an act of fidelity to him and the Libyan accent he always preferred me to speak” (3).

In the absence of his father, he recalls the day his mother, trying to save herself and Hisham, invites the local informer into her home for cake. Noting that his mother had never before shown him this side of her character, he remarks that “whenever I am faced with someone who holds the strings of my fate - an immigration office, a professor - I can feel the distant reverberations of that day, my inauguration into the dark art of submission. Perhaps that is why I often find a shameful pleasure in submitting to authority” (159). The image of Gloucester’s frozen moment in time, just before the drop, suggests as well Matar’s

uncertainty about whether his father has, in fact, fallen or is somehow recoverable. “When a father is neither dead nor alive,” he writes in “The Return,” “when he is a ghost, the will is impotent” (53).

Freud once observed that he could not think of “any need in childhood as strong as the need for a father’s protection” (Freud, 72). Read alongside Freud’s strongly expressed opinion, the “shameful pleasure in submitting to authority,” the “impotence,” may be interpreted as more socially acceptable emotions covering over any patricidal anger Matar may have felt at the time of his perceived abandonment by his father. In March of 2012, 33 years after his family had left Libya and gone into a wandering exile, Hisham finally returned to his family’s native land, the “country of men.” He had long resisted doing so, fearing the obvious threats from Qaddafi’s regime, but also perhaps fearing a confrontation with the ‘child’ that he had left behind in his memories, the younger self to whom he had struggled to give voice in his writings. Those 33 years were “the chasm that divided the man from the eight-year-old boy [he] was when [his] family left” (Matar, Return 47).² His mother surely understood this. Standing with her son in the terminal about to board for the flight to Libya, she asked him:

“Who’s returning? . . . Suleiman el-Dewani or Nuri el-Alfi?” Suleiman el-Dewani and Nuri el-Alfi are the exiled protagonists of my novels *In the Country of Men* and *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, respectively. She wanted to cheer me up, but also implicit in her question was a warning against what she knew I was intent on doing: searching for my father. She would rather me return with my two fictional characters than carry the ghost of that man she calls the Absent-Present. (Matar, Return 54)

2. The Fiction

The plots of the two novels repeat Hisham Matar’s own story with variations, additions, and subtractions yet, in a kind of abandonment of his own offspring, Matar seems surprised as he tells *Book Browse* that “I am often mistaken for my protagonist” (2). *In the Country of*

² Matar tells *Book Browse* that “in writing this book I was trying to wean myself of the country I had left and haven’t been able to return to for over 28 years now. You can say I was trying to cure myself of my Libya. I failed, of course.” (2)

Men (2006), the first novel is told in retrospect by its protagonist, Suleiman, now a young man, recalling himself at age nine in 1979, “the last summer before [he] was sent away” (Country, 1). In his interview with Nouri Gana about the novel, Matar suggests that the 24-year-old narrator “is trying to mend the fracture, the point at which his personal narrative had been amputated. This is why the prose shifts between the contemplative, reflective poise of an adult and the bewilderment of a child” (4). In choosing such a narrator, Matar has found a way to “recall” the early confusion and innocence, to reflect on it and, and encourage readers to forgive his complicity in his father’s disappearance.

In the novel the narrator’s relationship with his father had never been close; he notes that “the only activity Baba and I did alone was the walk together to the mosque on Fridays” (143). Early on, Suleiman goes downtown and is surprised to see his father (Faraj) there, since he was supposedly away on business; his father does not see him, and the boy does not call attention to his own presence. In an account faintly reminiscent of the scene from *King Lear* he writes: “I felt sick, anxious that I had somehow done the wrong thing. Baba wasn’t on a business trip, but here, in Tripoli, where we should be together. I could have reached out and caught him from where he was heading; why had I not acted?” (Country, 6) Faraj meets up with his confreres in opposition to the government, hanging a small red towel outside a top floor apartment as an apparent signal. This turns out to be the “primal scene” that Suleiman ultimately confesses to governmental authorities, innocently incriminating his own father and leading to his arrest and torture. Even as a young child, he writes in “The Return,” he had wanted to protect his father and “feared the consequences of his convictions; I was desperate to divert him from his path” (53).

The child’s inability to save a father from the consequences of “bad” decisions undergirds the anger such a child must also feel, and his inability may involve prior unacknowledged anger over abandonment. As Dahood El-Oqla suggests, “Suleiman’s troubled childhood ... pushes him to develop feelings of fear, shame, disconnection, and indifference regarding a world that has deprived him of love and hope from an early age” (70). This also prompts the older Suleiman to ask “How much of him is there in me? Can you become a man without becoming your father?” (Matar, Country 83). When his parents send

him off to Egypt to keep him from the coming storm, he is too young to see this as anything but a rejection by both his parents, a dislocation that produces “such pain in Suleiman that he can only compare it to the pain he experienced at the time of his circumcision” (El-Oqla 78). Even the adult Suleiman who is telling the story has by no means recovered from the excision from his homeland, and from his parents: “I suffer an absence, an ever-present absence, like an orphan not entirely certain of what he has missed or gained through his unchosen loss.... Egypt has not replaced Libya. Instead, there is this void, this emptiness I am trying to get at like someone frightened of the dark, searching for a match to strike” (Matar, *Country* 233).

Lacking a protective father, the young Suleiman understandably reaches out to other father figures. He longs “for the voice of the Guide to return” (Matar, *Country* 217). He finds the opposite of paternal protection from his friend’s noble father, who is publically hanged. This results in emotional scarring “that has survived well into [Suleiman’s] manhood, a kind of quiet panic, as if at any moment the rug could be pulled from beneath my feet” (198) - far safer, therefore, to identify with the ominous soldier parked outside his family home, to whom he revealed his father’s secrets.

3. Father Hunger, *Oedipus Rex*, and the Resurgent Feminine

In his Preface to André Green’s classic study of *Oedipus*, Frank Kermode notes that:

The child, faced with the mystery of his origins and excluded from any sharing in it, must seek it through interpreting his parents... But there is always too much to interpret. And each requirement to interpret is complicated by the force of repression, which insists that truth may be disclosed only as a hidden, an absent, truth. (xii).

Such analysis is suitable to Matar’s protagonists. Suleiman’s relationship with his mother, Najwa, has obvious Oedipal dimensions; in fact, *In the Country of Men* is at least as focused on her as it is on the father (Faraj). To Suleiman, “she had always seemed captive, captive in her own home, continually failing to prepare herself for anything else” (168). In the interview for *Book Browse* mentioned

above, Matar suggests that “the book revolves around the complex and intense relationship between the protagonist and his young mother” (1). With the father often away on business, legitimate or counter-governmental, she turns to her son for comfort. Often drunk, she confides in him about the “black day” (11) of her marriage to Faraj when she was 14 and Faraj was 23. Again, somewhat strangely, the narrator reports that “her story was mine too, it bound us, turned us into one” (12). Perhaps fearing that this parent might become as emotionally (and eventually, physically) distant as his father, he “imagined how it might be to live without her” (17) and “worried how the world might change if even for a second I was to look away, to relax the grip of my gaze” (20-21). The magical thinking of a child (and concomitant abiding guilt for impotence) controls the boy: “I was convinced that if my attention was applied fully, disaster would be kept at bay and she would return whole and uncorrupted” (21). He assumes parts of the spousal role in his solitary relationship with his mother, who pours out her soul to him in her drunken stories and frustrated dreams - “You are my prince. One day you’ll be a man and take me away on your white horse” (12). The narrator notes that “what I then could only explain as her illness bound us into an intimacy that has since occupied the innermost memory I have of love” (21).

This makes more painful the narrator’s utter rejection of his mother after his parents “exile” him to Egypt to protect him from the Libyan regime. As Iranian-American historian and gender-theorist Afsaneh Najmabadi notes, in classical Freudian theory the “process of transition to manhood” requires a “critical break with the love of the mother/wet-nurse/woman” (Ghoussoub, 154). Nonetheless, the novel comes full circle in a powerfully emotional reconciliation of the two in a train station. He identifies with her, projecting onto her his own “absent” relationship with Faraj:

She was twenty-four when I was sent away, the same age as I am now; fifteen when she had me, the same number of years I have spent away from her.... “Mama,” I say and say it again and again until she sees me. “Mama! Mama!” When I reach her she kisses my hands, my forehead, my cheeks, combs my hair with her fingers, straightens my collar. (246)

Deferral of closure is central to the structure of Matar's story, as it has been in his life (El-Ola, 79, 80). The figure of Scheherazade haunts the book, with Najwa despising the character for preferring slavery to death (perhaps, that is, she is too closely identifying with such a fate); Suleiman, on the other hand, greatly *admires* Scheherazade, though he soon concludes that "anticipation is the root, the source, of all misfortune" (226). Sent from home to the relative safety of Egypt by his parents, he has seen himself as "a faithful dog still waiting, confident that his owner will come to reclaim him" (Matar, 244).³

Afsaneh Najmabadi is fascinated by the repetition of plots in so many stories that circulate in a culture, and while asserting that Oedipus should not be universalized, she suggests that its resonance undergirds the power of insights provided by Freud's Oedipal theory: that masculinity is a cultural production, rather than a natural attribute, a performance and enactment that never fully achieves its ultimate aims; that it thus "continually depend[s] on repetition and revisitation; and that there is always an excess, a surplus of meaning, that cannot be fully accessed and displayed even by the omniscient analyst" (Ghoussoub, 148). Although the second novel, *Anatomy of a Disappearance* (2011) is not in any formal sense a sequel to *In the Country of Men* (2006), similar themes and characters dominate the action.

One notes the central irony of the first novel's title: that in a *country of men* the one man of greatest meaning for the narrator is nowhere to be found - perhaps in prison, perhaps in some other country, perhaps dead. The second novel turns more insistently to the resulting aporia - the "Absent-Present," as Hisham's mother put it. *Anatomy of a Disappearance* (2011) is a more sexualized rendering of themes viewed through the eyes of a child in *In the Country of Men* - no longer in a world of innocents, its protagonist is now a young man. Anyone familiar with *In the Country of Men* will believe they are in familiar territory when they read this novel's first sentence: "There are times when my father's absence is as heavy as a child sitting on my chest" (Anatomy, 3). Matar told Nouri Gana in an interview in 2007,

³ Nouri Gana directly asks him: "Does your narrative provide you with a sense of closure over the unredressed wrongs incurred by your family and the still undisclosed mystery of your father's disappearance?" Matar obfuscates, compliments Gana on an "interesting and interestingly phrased" question, and refuses to answer. (3)

again turning to the Western canon, that he was “intrigued by Lord Alfred Tennyson’s ability to grieve for his friend Lord Hallam for over fourteen years. [In] *Memoriam*, the series of poems he wrote over that period, is a moving and curious testimony to the perennial nature of grief” (2). Little wonder, then, that the concluding sentence of *Anatomy*’s opening paragraph describes the book as “an evocation, a possibility for resemblance ... [an] elegy.”

Comparable as the two novels are, their differences point to a broadening of the novelist’s abandonment. The novel begins in 1972, when Nuri el-Alfi, the protagonist, is an adolescent of 14. His family’s native country is not named. They have been in exile - first in Paris since 1958 (when the king was shot in the head), and then to Cairo. So he is, from birth, psychically displaced from his “home.” Nuri’s bereavement is worse than that of the earlier novel, since his mother dies when the boy is ten and his father, Pasha, disappears on a business trip. Nuri’s reflections seem to be an echo of Suleiman’s: “I felt guilty too, as I continue to feel today, at having lost him, at not knowing how to find him or take his place. Every day I let my father down” (*Anatomy*, 101). Nuri’s father’s political activities, which apparently prompt his abduction, are less clear than those of Faraj in *Country*, though they are pro-royalist and anti-revolutionary (much like those of Faraj, in the novel, and of Jaballah Matar, Hisham’s father), and Nuri (though his father tries to keep all this secret) wishes “to be him” (83). The slimly defined politics are quickly overtaken by the book’s romantic theme, which again has incestuous overtones. On a holiday together, Nuri and his father meet Mona, whose age (27 years) is halfway between Nuri’s and his father’s (41 years) - which makes the difference in ages for Faraj and Najwa in the earlier novel (nine years) seem insignificant. Nuri becomes quickly infatuated, but Mona and Nuri’s father fall in love, and marry.

The intensity of the relationship between Suleiman and his mother is here replicated, but with more license for sexual expression since Nuri is not related by blood to his stepmother. Mona is flirtatious with Nuri, obviously fully understanding the boy’s feelings; one evening, after her husband’s disappearance, she is distraught and brings the boy to bed with her. She later moves on to a man her own age, leaving Nuri bereft - *abandonado*, once again. Years later, he writes, he “occasionally had a lover, but ... [t]he morning after I would feel the

need to call Mona" (174). Consciously or not, he thereby enacts an abandonment of "lovers" in which he is the agent, the man, The Guide. "Losing" Mona, in any case, is beyond his capacity. But his disorientation in life is deepened when he learns, on digging deeper into his father's abduction, that during all those many years of his travels his father had been unfaithful to Nuri's mother. In fact, beyond various affairs there had been one of enduring importance with a woman named Beatrice (reminiscent, perhaps, of Dante's "guide" to the Beatific Vision). His father's lawyer, who reveals the truth about his client's affairs and introduces Nuri to Beatrice, must have been startled when Nuri proclaimed that "My father and I were very close" (194). Beatrice tells Nuri that his father had been with her the night a man and a woman speaking Arabic broke in and took him away, and she asks Nuri: "What do you think happened to your father?" At this point the narrator makes the strange observation that "I did not know how to answer. The truth is, I don't believe Father is dead. But I don't believe he is alive either" (198), as if he were in Limbo. Further complicating Nuri's gradually awakening to the truth of his absent father, Beatrice tells him that it was for Nuri that his father had married Mona, since he knew the boy needed a mother (with whom, of course, the boy had already spent a night in bed).

Nuri vengefully reveals this to Mona; she then reveals the final devastating piece of the puzzle that is Nuri's complicated heritage: his real mother (*not* the one who died and to whom his father was first married) was Naima, the family servant, who all this time had been waiting in the background for her illegitimate son's return. He does, finally, return to Egypt and to Naima, but "what I knew - and preferred that I did not know - could not be uttered. It was impossible to change our shared history, to be mother and son in the clear light of day. And this was not a hindrance, this impossibility - more a mercy" (215). He does not acknowledge her as his mother, nor speed to her side, instead first taking a vacation in Alexandria. Meanwhile, she works quietly preparing meals she remembers he had loved before he went away. In Nuri's cruel disregard of his birth mother, the second novel is remarkably distant from the first.

The closing passage of *Anatomy of a Disappearance* has Nuri trying on his father's old suits, surprised at how "clothes could shrink so much from lack of wear. The suit," in fact, "might have fit the

fourteen-year-old boy I was when I last saw my father” (223). The father, it seems, has become smaller in the young man’s estimation, a memory that he has literally outgrown. The novel ends with a life in shambles, an adult-child. Back at square one, *he* is the one now abandoning his mother and thereby reenacting what his father had done. If some might interpret this as a necessary abjection and a sign that Nuri has become his own man, others will surely decry it as capitulation to patriarchal misogyny.

“To Be or Not to Be”

“In mourning, it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself.” (Freud, 1957)

Matar’s corpus to date offers a model of literary mourning (or elegy, in his words) that one finds in many contemporary Arabic novels. Freud’s two preconditions of classic melancholy are unavowed loss and ambivalent identification. Mourning, in that schema, is a healthy response to loss, but melancholy may need intervention if it leads to suicidal thoughts. In melancholy, as opposed to mourning, the loss is unconscious; in melancholy there is a loss of self-regard (cf. Eli).⁴ But, as Norman Nikro points out, in Freud’s revision of the theory in 1923 “mourning and melancholia are not so much diametrically opposed, as the latter is now regarded as less a pathological condition than a process by which the ego forms its character” (141).

As Susan Cole describes it, almost repeating the words of Hisham Matar’s mother: “Mourning ritual, like tragedy, is a performance of ambivalence on behalf of an absent presence.” Ambivalence is here defined as the “co-existence of antithetical emotions, attitudes, ideas, or wishes toward a given object or situation” (Cole, 2). She uses as one of her principal examples *Hamlet*, which may be a far more appropriate Shakespearean model for what Matar is about than is *King Lear*, despite the author’s fondness for *Lear*. “*Hamlet*,” writes Cole “is the tragedy of a mourner in a world which provides no context for mourning” (3) - and so, in a sense, is Hisham Matar, creating protagonists who mirror the Prince of Denmark.

⁴ Later, in *Ego and the Id* (1923), Freud reviewed and somewhat modified his earlier (1915-1917) notions of melancholy, coming to regard melancholy less negatively, but more in terms of character formation. Walter Benjamin does not view melancholy “as an illness to be overcome or cured, but rather as a mood or disposition towards the world” (Ferber).

Matar embodies themes that echo from country to country in the Arab world. His novels can be easily read as documents of the ongoing crisis for males haunted by a melancholic imagining of a resurgent caliphate. As Samira Aghacy observes,

Under the pressure of the patriarchal state, man's oedipal quest is disrupted and the male psyche is impaired, producing marginal men devoid of heroic traits and unable to impress their stamp upon a baffling and incomprehensible world.... All in all, one could say that men [find] themselves in a liminal position, a state of being caught between two worlds: a world of contestation and defiance and of imposed idleness and torpor. (8-9)

In his study of literature arising out of the Lebanon civil war, Norman Saadi Nikro notes the postmodern mingling of forms and the resistance to closure that typifies such writing. While both these characteristics apply to Matar's novels, Nikro's discussion of mourning and melancholy in the films of Mohamed Soueid is especially suggestive of ways we may approach *In the Company of Men*, and *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, and Matar's revelatory essay, "The Return." Nikro writes that "the significance of what is remembered can never be stabilized, but remains contingent on how others variably recall and orient themselves to the past ... or else how past experiences and events are passed on as stories" (Nikro, 30). The interpellation of public and private is of particular interest to Nikro's analysis of Lebanese amnesia towards the horrors of the civil war. He turns to filmmaker Mohamed Soueid's civil war trilogy of documentary films, proposing that "with Soueid's introspective style the [Lebanese civil] war looms as a barely digested and ultimately inexplicable background to a fractured sense of self and circumstance between fragmentation and reconfiguration" (130). For Nikro, the filmmaker manages to "translate haunting into history" through "*dis-attachment*, through both a *melancholic* situating of self and *mourning* as nurture and transformation of self" (137, italics in original).

Where does the search ultimately lead Hisham Matar? In "The Return" he tells of receiving a call soon after Tripoli fell in August of 2011 when the prisons were emptied of political prisoners. One

prisoner had lost his memory but had one possession: a photo of Hisham's father. "I wanted to ask about the picture," Matar writes. "Was it a recent one or an old one? Was it pinned to the wall, kept under the pillow, or did they find it on the floor beside the man's bed? Was there a bed? Did the prisoner have a bed? *I asked none of these questions*" (49, emphasis added). One wonders why the silence at such an opportunity? Why insist on *not* "knowing"? Similarly, in an NPR interview in 2013 he tells Terry Gross: "You know, something extraordinary happened when I was in Libya making these inquiries. I got a sense of my father, in a way, restraining me, urging me not to proceed" (9) - suggesting a preference for melancholy over mourning. In an interview with Lina Attar for *Jadaliyya* he remarks that he began writing *Anatomy* immediately upon concluding *Country*, but when he finished *Anatomy* "[he] didn't have any burning idea, so [he] thought, well, this is an interesting place, to be out of a book" (2). The double entendre is quite interesting. It suggests that he is caught in melancholia, and unable to mourn (see Abraham and Torok). There is *not* a sense of completion at the end of the second novel, though readers might at this point suspect an obsession. As he would phrase it, "I am fixed on not being content" (Kunzru13). For one whose literary output is relentlessly focused on parental absence, why does the actual author resist the conclusion, the cliff, as it were, to which he has led his readers?

If he will not *see* the grave, the grave will seek him out. Preparing to return to Libya, the novelist takes a walk near Columbia University and passes over a grille in the sidewalk and looks down into "a room, barely high enough for a man to stand and certainly not wide enough for him to lie down" ("The Return," 50). Strangely, he gets to his knees and bursts into tears: "I had several times in the past mourned my father's absence, but never before his death." In the realm of Matar's fictional world, most would agree with Annie Gagliano's conclusion that "because of all the terrible, incomprehensible secrets that Suleiman [*In the Country of Men*] is expected to keep, he is a profoundly repressed boy who becomes a melancholy man" (Gagliano, 35). In Matar's life, one notes that the publication party for *Anatomy of a Disappearance* came in March of 2011, when the Libyan revolution against Qaddafi hung in the balance. Matar describes that party as similarly "heavy with melancholy ... [with] a sense of deep

anxiety and distraction, a sense that suddenly the events ha[d] superseded even something as important to me as my book” (Attar, 2).⁵ In other words, he is (again) propelled by history “out of the book,” but now has no obvious point for re-entry. For a novelist, this is a perilous cliff, indeed.

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⁵But Nouri Gana stresses “the continua of convergences rather than divergences between mourning and melancholia” (Gana, 2011, 179).

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